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Voices from beyond paper: Risset's and Kowalski's 'L'autre face'
revised version, 4 September 2015

Ton acte toujours s'applique à du papier¹
(Mallarmé, 2003, p. 215)

Roger Kowalski, author of the poem set to music by Jean-Claude Risset in 'L'autre face', was born in 1934 (and died in 1975). Risset himself was born four years later, in 1938. I am twenty years younger than Risset. But the artistic epoch in which I have lived my life has remained in one essential way that of Kowalski, whereas Risset has moved beyond it.

Roger Kowalski wrote on paper. Even now, in the age of the e-book, if one wants to read Kowalski's poetry, the normal way to do it is to buy his poetry on paper. I have done this, and it came naturally to me. I have spent my professional life reading and writing about works on paper. The computer music in Risset's 'L'autre face', on the other hand, belongs to a world beyond paper. Paper cannot record or contain it. It was not created on or for paper. And this is not merely a material fact. Its origin in the computer age is so central to its operation that I would hazard a guess that it will initially seem alienating, foreign, incomprehensible, or even unmusical to anyone for whom poetry and music are essentially composed of works written down on paper, to be subsequently brought to life by readers or performers. That category of paper readers includes, so to speak, the majority of my own artistic personality. I therefore initially approached Risset's music very much from the outside, from an earlier age. But I came to feel that it was not a mistake for me to do so. I found myself believing that although Risset's music lives in the computer age, it has deep roots in the art of the paper age. This essay aims first, to analyse the soil in which I observed those roots by reading Kowalski's poem; and second, to ask what happens to the aesthetic of the paper age in Risset's work, especially in the echoes between the soprano part, and the computer music. What I would like to accomplish by these means is a reconnection between the aesthetic of the paper age (which is Kowalski's), and that of Risset's music; so that people who, like me, might initially find Risset's music disorienting, can learn to love it, through a recognition that while in some ways it is indeed essentially new and an art of its own time, in others it is a reincarnation of an old artistic soul.

Risset's 'L'autre face' is described by the composer as 'for soprano and computer-generated tape'. The tape contains no words. The soprano sings all the words of Roger Kowalski's poem. There is thus a clear distribution of roles between singer and tape, analogous to the traditional roles of singer and instrumental accompaniment. However, whereas in the classical tradition, the tradition of the paper age, both the singer's part and the accompaniment exist on paper, to be interpreted by the performers, in this case only the singer's part exists thus.² The poem, Kowalski's 'L'autre face',

¹ 'Your act always applies itself to paper'. This translation is mine, as are all translations in this essay, except for the translation of Kowalski's poem (see below), which is my own revision of a translation supplied by Risset (in a personal communication).

² Monsieur Risset was kind enough to confirm this fact to me, in an e-mail.

has as its most explicit theme the operation of paper and ink. It is a poem on paper in more than one sense. We receive it on paper, and it tells us about something that happens on paper, something that is characteristic, I would argue, of the work of art in general, as Kowalski conceives it. The poem can thus be read as a reflection on the paper-mediated status of Risset's soprano part; and it is with such a reading that I will begin, before moving on to the question of the extent to which the computer tape escapes that reflection. Since the poem is quite short, as well as very dense, I shall quote it in its entirety. It is the first poem in the first book of poems Kowalski published, *Le Silencieux*.³

Vois: j'ai posé sur le papier un point d'encre très noire; ce feu sombre est l'eau même de la nuit; un silence d'étoiles échevelées.

Il suffit de peu de choses, presque rien; une syllabe, une consonne et je deviens tempête; un geste de l'arbre, et cent racines me lient;

le pas des filles de mémoires, et je tourne vers ta face un œil qu'emplit une plainte égarée; écoute: quelque chose ici n'est point de ce monde;

ni le verbe, ni le point où s'articule un discours entrepris dans l'ennui, mais la profonde, chaste et noire encre sur ton masque de papier.

See: I have placed on the paper a point of very black ink; this dark fire is the very water of the night; a silence of unbridled stars.

Very little suffices, almost nothing; one syllable, one consonant and I become tempest; one gesture of the tree, and a hundred roots bind me;

the footstep of the daughters of memories, and I turn towards your face an eye filled with a strayed plaintive cry; listen: something here is not of this world;

neither the verb, nor the point in which a discourse undertaken in boredom articulates itself, but the profound, chaste and black ink on your mask of paper.

Kowalski's poem starts with an imperative: 'Vois'; 'See'. The normal conventions of poetry-reading might lead us to expect this is addressed to us, to the reader as an individual. What are we being enjoined to see? Ink which the author has placed upon the paper. In asking us initially to look at ink on paper, rather than to read words, Kowalski is tapping into a great French poetic tradition stretching back to the 1860s, which presents the poem, not as the communication of a message through the sense of words, but as a physical object made of paper and ink, coming legitimately

³ I cite and translate here the poem as given by Risset. The version printed in Kowalski's *Poésies complètes* (Kowalski, 2000, p. 29) is different in two regards: it gives 'choses', not 'choses', in the second stanza, and 'memoire' rather than 'mémoires' in the third.

between the poet and the reader, and indeed absolutely separating them. An epoch-defining passage of Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* (that extraordinary work, completed in 1869, which in so many ways contains within itself the artistic revolutions of the 20th century) presents us with a poet-narrator vainly longing to pierce the page in order to violate the adolescent reader who populates his fantasies:

Que ne puis-je regarder à travers ces pages séraphiques le visage de celui qui me lit. S'il n'a pas dépassé la puberté, qu'il s'approche. Serre-moi contre toi, et ne crains pas de me faire du mal; rétrécissons progressivement les liens de nos muscles. Davantage. Je sens qu'il est inutile d'insister; l'opacité, remarquable à plus d'un titre, de cette feuille de papier, est un empêchement des plus considérables à l'opération de notre complète jonction.
(Lautréamont, 1990, 267)

Why may I not see through these seraphic pages the face of him who reads me. If he has not progressed beyond puberty, let him draw near. Clasp me to you, and do not fear lest you hurt me; let us progressively contract the bonds of our muscles. Harder. I feel it is useless to insist; the opacity, remarkable in more than one way, of this sheet of paper, is a most considerable obstruction to the operation of our complete unification.

Given that the poet-narrator of Lautréamont's work has already given us ample evidence of what he does to the people he loves when he gets close to them – he scratches and maims them, chops off body parts, rapes, drinks their blood, and murders them – the reader of this passage feels relief at the protective presence of that sheet of paper. The writer cannot get to us. He cannot do what he likes with us. He cannot control us or have his wicked way with us. The paper saves us. The writer is, after all, not alive, not present; it is only paper that he has left us, paper and ink, and paper and ink are inanimate. They cannot harm us.

Or can they? The fact is that no one reads *Les Chants de Maldoror* and comes out unscathed. We may not lose blood or body parts as we read, but we do, unmistakably, lose our sense of being in control of our own language and our own integrity as speaking subjects. I cannot go, here, into the detail of how Lautréamont achieves this; but the black magic clearly works thanks to the paper itself. For at the same time as it shields us from the physical aggression of the cruel and perverted poet, it shields him from our sight, so that he can become a shape-shifting monster, whose voice we can never pin down safely to an origin or a sense. In his writing are many drives, pulsions, meanings, possibilities, ambiguities, dishonesties, longings, loves, and hatreds, which make no sense as a reasoned totality, but are held together by the form of the ink on the paper; and the trick of genius which that ink plays on us is to persuade us, gradually, that we ourselves are not, as we would like to think, simple speaking voices, speaking with the voice of reason, but in fact as complex and contradictory as what we are reading, complex and contradictory in a way that can only be understood if we consider ourselves as bundles of inscriptions always waiting for interpretation; as if we too, like Lautréamont, were beings of ink and paper. What we call French poststructuralism stems in large part from a realisation of the implications of this way of thinking, of this questioning of the boundaries between the written inscription and the speaking voice. Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, first published in 1967 (five years after Kowalski's poem), has had a decisive influence on literary critical approaches to poetry precisely because it demonstrates with such clarity how,

when we read, we seek for and value the original speaking voice; yet that voice can only be given life by the dynamics of writing, of a medium that depends on the technical, on a material substance that comes between the voice and us. Writing obscures the source of the voice, but only such obscurity allows a voice to be born. Paper is at once the cursed obstacle that prevents us from directly perceiving the soul of the writer, and the sole means by which that soul can be constructed. The difference between poetry and other uses of language, from this point of view, is that, to paraphrase Barthes, it points, as it advances, to its paper mask.⁴ Non-poetic language we may receive as transparent to its meaning. But as we read a poem, it draws our attention to the physical object, the poem, ink on paper, that always remains to be interpreted.

Kowalski's poem begins, as we have seen, with a gesture characteristic of this tradition, by asking us, not to understand words, but to see ink on paper. It ends similarly. At the beginning he presented us with paper and ink; at the end, with ink, paper, and a mask:

neither the verb, nor the point in which a discourse undertaken in boredom articulates itself,
but the profound, chaste and black ink on your mask of paper.

On whose face is this paper mask, on which the ink is posed? On the one hand, such an address, in a poem, is often construed as being to some vague figure of the lyrical beloved. This reading might have been encouraged by the other occurrence of a second person possessive adjective in the poem, in its third stanza:

I turn towards your face an eye filled with a strayed plaintive cry; listen: something here is
not of this world;

Here, Kowalski might seem to be looking at the face of someone ... someone he knows, doubtless, perhaps a daughter of memories, and we think again of the lyrical beloved ... but we should, perhaps, especially if we have read *Les Chants de Maldoror*, be wary. He does not say that he sees her or his (the French gives no indication of the addressee's gender, at any point) face, but only that he turns his eye towards it; and in any case, the word 'face' can mean 'side', as well as 'face'.⁵ Is his eye turning towards the face of his reader, or of a lyrical beloved? Or is it turning, rather, towards the other side of a piece of paper? The following (and final) stanza seems to give the answer: towards a paper mask over a human face belonging to the addressee of the poem – who had initially appeared to be the reader, then surreptitiously transformed into a lyrical beloved. Are the reader and the beloved being, in the end, conflated, as they were in *Les Chants de Maldoror*? This is one of those vertiginous questions that Kowalski's poem, in its self-reflexive economy, continually poses, without ever giving us time to answer. Our attention has been continuously distracted; for between the first line of the poem and the last, his spot of ink has done truly astonishing things; incomprehensible things. Kowalski's poem is bewildering and dazzling in much the same way as Rimbaud's prose

⁴ One of Barthes's favourite mottoes, taken from Descartes, was 'Larvatus prodeō'. As Rachel Gabara points out, he 'repeatedly mistranslated *Larvatus prodeō*, always in the same way; not content merely to advance masked, he pointed to the mask' (Gabara, 2006, pp. 16-17).

⁵ As Risset points out, in a note which he placed before his own translation (personal communication).

poems, from which he clearly borrows much of his technique. A succession of powerful but very briefly evoked images emerge from the page. The link between them is not linear, and not very clear. They seem, indeed, children of ink, and not of a normal speaking human consciousness. They emerge from the night, like stars; they may be given meaning, like stars, but again like stars, that meaning can appear essential or arbitrary, and one is never quite sure whence it originates. Is it from the ink itself, as if traces of ink on paper were able to create poetry through their own independent power, without reference to the intentional speaking voice of a human agency? That seems to be what Kowalski implies, in the second stanza of the poem. A single consonant is enough, he says; we need no lyric poet constructing wordy edifices of sense, no ‘discours entrepris dans l’ennui’. We cannot, however, entirely believe this. No single consonant or syllable, no single spot of ink, could have created the effect of Kowalski’s poem, could have placed upon us a paper mask as his poem does; and the first index of this is that he references, in this poem which seems to deny the value of reference, the very process by which reference can be denied value. It is only in discourse that he can deny the value and interest of discourse. He must talk to get beyond talk. Should I have said, rather, that he must write to get beyond writing? But the critical point in the poem is, precisely (and typically of the tradition to which it belongs), the crossover between the written and the spoken, the visible and the audible. He turns an eye, an eye filled not with what can be seen, but with a sound, ‘une plainte égarée’; then he asks us not to see (as he had at the beginning), but to listen: ‘écoute’. Why? Ink on paper determines what we see. It cannot determine what we hear. To move from the written poem to the heard sound requires an active interpretation; not merely an interpretation of sense, but the creation, in the interpretive act, of a physical, concrete, sensible object in a different medium, a sound, not a sight. The sound evoked, or invoked, by the poem, does not materially belong to the paper world of the poem. As we hear what is (rationally speaking) accessible only to the eye, something appears which is ‘not of this world’; something appears from or through the paper which is not of the world of paper.

The soprano who sings the extraordinary part that Risset has written has, of course, to create sound from paper and ink, an audible thing from a visible thing. This process we normally term interpretation. It is at the very heart of our notion of what we recognise as classical music;⁶ in the same way, I would argue, as what we call poetry has, for two centuries now (in other words, not coincidentally, for as long as the concept of classical music has existed), been defined by what happens when we imagine the passage from ink on paper to audible voice. In accordance with this logic, we might say that composers interpret poems when they set them to music. Singers then interpret the music when they sing it. What justifies using the same verb to describe those two acts? Most obviously, their relationship to paper. We conceive of the work, whether it be a poem or a piece of music, as having a soundless primary existence as ink on paper, in a form sanctioned by its creator. ‘Vois: j’ai posé sur le papier un point d’encre’, wrote Kowalski; and we feel that we must respect the form of that point of ink, as posed by him. Risset, however, as composers do, deforms Kowalski’s ink patterns; he re-organises them, stretching them, repeating and adding to them, superimposing on them his own patterning. And the singer similarly adds, as she sings, her own patterning to what Risset wrote, in ink, on paper. Is this interpretation simply to be, as Stravinsky often seemed to say, deplored? No: it is as necessary to art as it is deplorable.

⁶ As Lawrence Kramer has forcefully argued, notably in *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Kramer, 2007, p. 23).

Kowalski himself cannot not give us his point of ink, pure and uninterpreted. He is not here to give it to us. And in any case, what we see is not the point. What we see, what he has left us, is not the point of ink itself; it is the words around it. In those words, Kowalski had already interpreted his own point. The process of interpretation can and may have no beginning and no end. It does not refer us back to an original message present in the creator, for the creator is, in fact, also an interpreter. In spite of what she or he asks of me, I, like her or him, cannot rest at the point where I see a point of ink. I, too, interpret. As I do, I find that the work is not simply what is on the paper. 'L'autre face' requires me not only to see what is there, but to listen to what is not there. It lives in the space between the paper and me, or perhaps behind the paper; a space haunted by the voices of those I imagine interpreting it – Kowalski's, my own, and those of others more or less distinct and personal to me, including, for me now, Jean-Claude Risset, and the soprano Maria Tegzes.

I have, up to this point in my essay, been applying to 'L'autre face' the critical techniques I have acquired over three decades of working with music and poetry on paper. The electroacoustic part of Risset's work, however, has no existence on paper. It is not open to interpretation in the same way. He created it, not as a score to be read, but as a work of sound, always to be heard the same. This music has no interpreter, in the sense in which the paper age would understand it. No human can voice it. There is no room for our interpretation to alter its sounds. Kowalski's words, like Risset's soprano part, require us to imagine a human voice interpreting them, and each interpretation will be different; but the electroacoustic part might seem to refuse that voicing. The key question for me is: does this mean that Risset's 'L'autre face' belongs to a fundamentally different aesthetic world, where interpretation no longer has the role it had during the paper age? Or does it mean, rather, that the locus of interpretation is displaced, forced to find a new home, a refugee from paper? Not suprisingly, given my personal history, I will argue for the latter.

As Derrida has taught us to see,⁷ the voice that we receive from paper is never simply that of a living human being. It is always, more or less obviously, that of a ghost, a spirit, a phantom, whose life is not of this world. How could it be otherwise, since the voice of poetry speaks forever from matter, from the dead matter of the paper page? Kowalski's poem, like so many in its tradition, plays with this ghostliness of the poetic voice as an emanation of the page. 'Something here is not of this world', he tells us; and this something from out of this world turns out to be ink on a paper mask.

In Risset's 'L'autre face', those words – 'quelque chose ici n'est point de ce monde' – are spoken audibly. For most of the piece, which lasts eleven and a half minutes, Kowalski's words are not readily comprehensible through the acrobatic soprano writing and the peculiarly fascinating vocal special effects. Some isolated words are pronounced clearly, including the first – 'Vois' – and 'un silence'. The longest sequence of such words, however, and the only one that contains a syntactically complete enunciation, with subject, verb, and complement, is: 'écoute: quelque chose ici n'est point de ce monde'. These words therefore stand out; and they seem, uniquely, to provide a referential point of convergence between the soprano part and the computer music. Just before them, there had been an uncanny moment of confusion for the listener. Up to this point, the sounds

⁷ Most obviously in *Spectres de Marx*, which weaves all its arguments around the figure of the speaking ghost in *Hamlet*; but throughout his career, Derrida returned constantly to the ghostliness of the human voice, especially when mediated by paper, from 'La Parole soufflée', first published in 1965 (Derrida, 1967b, pp. 253-295), to the prolonged and intimate meditations on friendship after death in *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Derrida, 2003).

of the computer music had been quite distinct in timbre from the human voice. But shortly before the injunction 'écoute' ('listen'), one hears sounds which create the sensation that other voices are emerging. Are they human? Are they other people's? (This last is a question which would not arise if one were at a live performance, doubtless; as ever, the material conditions of the work are the condition of its interpretation.) One soon suspects them of being produced by the computer; recorded, or synthesized? But one does not have long to wonder. They are soon silenced, replaced by an insistent drum beat which in turn falls silent. In that silence, the soprano – it must be her, for the computer voices never speak – pronounces the words: 'écoute: quelque chose ici n'est pas de ce monde'. What is not of this world? The silence, perhaps? Or the computer voices? As if to push their claim, they come in again, dialoguing (but how can one have a dialogue with a voice that cannot speak?) with the soprano for forty seconds or so. Then they vanish, and the computer music becomes once again as inhuman as before.

The effect is ghostly, otherworldly, certainly. It is ghostly because of that uncertainty concerning whether we should hear these voices as human. Are they mere things, material sound objects, created by technology on the computer? By technology – or by Jean-Claude Risset? If he synthesized them, may we hear his voice in them, as we might hear Kowalski's on paper? Perhaps therein lies a first similarity between the work of and on paper, and Risset's computer work. The paper is a thing, not a voice. The computer sound is a thing, not a voice. Both tell us that only our interpretive imaginations could allow us to hear a voice in those things. Yet precisely by the way that they tell us this, by the way they point to their masks, by the way they invite us to do something that they themselves show to be irrational, they give us the power to conjure up, to hear in poetry or to see in music, something that is not of this world.

Almost from the beginning of Risset's piece, the soprano had been asked to sing extremely high notes; notes higher than those of her comfortable range, notes that push her towards the limits of what can sound like song, as in Mozart's *Schauspieldirektor*, in which a duel between two sopranos pushes them ever higher, to the limits of their voice, while each claims to incarnate the nobility of her art. But the soprano in 'L'autre face' cannot win; for her rival is a computer, and a computer does not have to contend with the limits of the human body. At the beginning of the piece, the computer had produced bass sounds. As the piece progresses, gradually the average pitch of the computer music rises. Towards the end, the soprano sings her way up again into the scarcely human register of Mozart's duelling sopranos, then is gently silenced; the computer music continues for a few seconds, having long abandoned the bass register, and the piece ends with sounds some of which are so high that Risset himself can no longer hear them.⁸ Who has won, the computer or the singer? The computer outlasted the soprano (as the piano part, in the tradition of Romantic Lieder, so often outlasts the singer), and rose higher. But it was her human voice that taught us to hear music in its sound. The computer music would have appeared an object in this world, rather than something from another world, if it had not become a ghostly echo of an invisible human voice. Machines, after all, have no ghosts, so they cannot of themselves be of another world. Only the soprano's interpretation of a paper part allowed us to hear a musical voice in the computer's sound.

Of course this is only half true. There is no reason why a computer cannot produce music all by itself, without a soprano and without paper, because we no longer cling to a definition of music which requires the inclusion of the human. Or do we? Perhaps a point of collusion between the

⁸ Personal communication.

paper age and the computer age is a common relationship to the inhuman. Art must point to its inhumanity, to its mask as an inhuman object. The work is nothing but a thing: ink on paper, magnetic data on a tape. But to point to that materiality of the work as an inhumanity is to presuppose a countervailing belief in humanity, humanity as something that is not material, something from another world. And that is how from this thing called art, thanks precisely to the way it refers to its own status as thing, ghostly voices emerge.

The paper age began when we realised that we, too, like paper, ink, and machines, must, rationally speaking, be material beings. We have no reasonable right to believe we have a kind of voice denied to matter. If we continue to wish to believe, we have to learn to summon up voices from elsewhere. This is not rational, and for the rational beings that we have become, it cannot be a comfortable process. How uncomfortable it is depends on how the artist points to the mask, to the thingness, to the technique of art. Popular art, including much computer-generated music, knows how to hide its artificiality. It speaks to us in a language we can understand without reflecting on its material medium, and does not challenge us to consider where its voice comes from. This is neither Risset's art, not Kowalski's. Both have that quality of uncompromising honesty which seems to me to characterise the high art of our time. They deny us the right to hear the voice as a voice, as a human voice, until we have looked in the eye the strange conditions in which it reaches us. I said at the beginning of this essay that Risset's computer music is in a way alien to me, as a person of the paper age. But Kowalski's poetry is equally alien to any normal reader of French, and, in the end, for the same reasons. To read Kowalski's poem, one must discipline oneself to observe how it refers to its physical medium, and how that reference interacts with the way it affects us, to allow the emergence of a voice from outside this world. To hear Risset's music, I had to think through how it refers to its own medium, how the voice is trapped and reduced to matter in that medium, and under what conditions the spirit then emerges. Replacing the piece of paper by the computer, and ink by digital impulses, although it changes the kind of work we have to do to interpret it, does not necessarily change the nature of art. Risset's 'L'autre face' could be characterised as a work between worlds: half on paper, half on computer. But the paper half does not compete with the values of the computer half. Rather, it shares its ambivalence with the new medium.

That sharing of values between the paper age and the machine age is by no means unique to 'L'autre face'. Ever since the age of mechanical reproduction began, the relationship of the technical to the human in art has been a vexed question. Art has, if I may be allowed the generalisation, opposed itself to science by refusing the straightforward reduction of the human to the technical. But it has never been possible to maintain simply that art is human, and opposed to the technical, nor that art is technical, and opposed to the human. From Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve future* (1886) to Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) or Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988), artists have responded to the vexed question through a re-casting in newly developed technical media of human images from the past that had been recorded in older media, so that the reverberation between the human and the technical appears not new, but something that had always existed – and had always engendered ghostly presences. In the history of both poetry and music, ink and paper remain an archetypal form of those older media. (Indeed, Kowalski's injunction that we see the ink he has placed on the paper is itself a reference back to an earlier, apparently pre-technical age; for as he knew, his readers would see, not his own ink, but commercial ink from a printing works.) Computer music can therefore always turn, when it wants to be haunted, to paper. The spirit of the paper age lives on.

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